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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RANGOON 000749

SIPDIS

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TAGS: EAID PGOV PHUM PREF PREL BM NGO

SUBJECT: BURMA: UNHCR AND WORLD VISION ASKED TO CURTAIL ACTIVITIES

REF: RANGOON 730 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: CDA, a.i. Ronald K. McMullen for Reasons 1.4 (b,d)

¶1. (C) Summary: The GOB has asked the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Burma to curtail its activities on the eastern border with Thailand. UNHCR is not sure why. The Minister of Home Affairs (MOHA) told UNHCR that in the future the Ministry of Progress of Border Areas and National Races and Development Affairs (NaTaLa) would be its coordinating ministry. UNHCR told MOHA that if its activities are curtailed that its budget may likely be reallocated to other countries. UNHCR has misgivings about working with NaTaLa and has requested to maintain the status quo until the end of the year. INGOS, and World Vision in particular, have been warned not to work in certain areas. Local authorities have encouraged them to continue their programs, but to be careful. End Summary.

KEEP AWAY FROM THE THAI BORDER

¶2. (C) In a recent meeting with Mr. Shivanka Dhanapala, officer-in-charge of UNHCR Myanmar, he told poloff that the MOHA contacted UNHCR in mid-May and orally requested it to curtail travel to areas along the eastern border with Thailand where UNHCR has only recently been given permission to operate (ref B) in Karen State, Mon State, and Tanintharyi Division. The MOHA did not give any specific reasons for its request but UNHCR feels it may be a direct result of the May 7 bombings. (Note: INGOs that have MOUs with the Ministry of Health were informed in a meeting in early June that restrictions are in effect for travel to five ethnic states and Tanintharyi Division for at least another month (ref A). End Note.) UNHCR responded that it had already done detailed trip planning, so the GOB relented at the last minute and let UNHCR carry out its trips. However, the fate of future trips is uncertain. UNHCR said that the GOB seems satisfied with UNHCR's long-standing program in northern Rakhine State and so far, the GOB has made no restrictions on its activities there.

¶3. (C) On May 31, Mr. Dhanapala had a meeting with Maj. Gen. Maung Oo, the Minister of Home Affairs. The minister said that in the future NaTaLa would be the coordinating ministry for not only UNHCR, but also "all 210 foreign organizations" currently working in Burma. (Note: UNHCR is astonished at the figure of 210, because it is not aware of even half that number of foreign organizations working in Burma, unless this includes businesses as well. NaTaLa is one of the ministries that is involved with community development, not just in the border areas, but in practically the whole country, excluding Rangoon and Mandalay. End Note.)

¶4. (C) UNHCR is concerned about working with NaTaLa, because this ministry has been focusing on establishing industrial/economic zones in border areas where people are relocated to work in factories that the Thais may set up and UNHCR feels this is outside their mandate. UNHCR is also worried that NaTaLa may lack sufficient experience in working with foreign organizations and it may not have sufficient influence within the government.

¶5. (C) Dhanapala told the minister that if UNHCR had to curtail its projects in the eastern border areas its project funds designated for Burma might be reallocated to UNHCR programs in other countries. The minister seemed to be concerned about the possible loss of funds for Burma. In the meantime, UNHCR has forwarded its action plans for the next three months to the MOHA and has requested that the status quo be maintained at least until the end of this year to complete their ongoing projects. To date the MOHA has not responded to this request and all of its communications to UNHCR have been oral, despite UNHCR's request for written instructions.

BEWARE OF WORLD VISION

¶6. (C) The Country Director of World Vision Myanmar told poloff that on February 22, World Vision Myanmar staff were holding a routine community meeting in Kengtung, eastern Shan State to discuss setting up small, community-based medical

emergency funds. World Vision proposed offering the communities small grants of 5,000 kyats (\$5). A government official who was observing the meeting erroneously reported that World Vision was going to hand out grants of \$5,000.

17. (C) When the report reached Vice-Senior General Maung Aye, he wrote a letter on March 3 to all regional military commanders and told them that INGOs are not permitted to work with communities and instead the community development funds should be handed over to the government authorities and they would do the work. The letter mentioned World Vision in particular. World Vision was not given the letter, but local officials have let World Vision staff read their copies. The official who originally filed the erroneous report has apologized to World Vision and local officials in several townships have appealed to World Vision to continue its activities in their communities, but just "be careful." World Vision reports that the Ministry of Social Welfare has told Save the Children - UK to cease operations in Shan State, but World Vision's coordination ministry, the Ministry of Health, has not issued the same instructions. In order to "be careful," for the past month World Vision has not permitted its foreign staff to travel to projects in border areas.

WE WANT TO CLIP YOUR WINGS

18. (C) Comment: Dhanapala feels that the delay in obtaining a written response from MOHA reflects a reticence of most ministries to make important decisions without clearance from the senior leadership. He thinks that Vice-Senior General Maung Aye may be behind the move to have all foreign organizations report to NaTaLa. Moreover, it is widely known that Maj. Gen Maung Oo is uncomfortable working with foreign organizations so he may also favor shifting the responsibility to NaTaLa.

19. (C) Based on both UNHCR's and World Vision's experiences, it appears the GOB is evaluating the future role of aid agencies in Burma and the extent to which the GOB is willing to permit them to work at the grassroots level. The GOB may be thinking of turning NaTaLa into an NGO coordinating agency, similar to the People's Aid Coordination Committee (PACCOM) in Vietnam, and possibly trying to limit NGOs' access to people at the community level. End Comment.  
McMullen